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## THE PRODUCTION OF PLAYS IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Even the growth of moving-picture plays during the last decade has scarcely surpassed, either in acceleration or in quality, the geometric ratio of increase shown by the production of plays in high schools. The high school which I know best, for instance, was built nine years ago; its auditorium, though equipped with opera chairs, was constructed with no stage. Where the stage should have been, permanent rows of circling stairstep platforms were planted for the school chorus—all with the intent, as admitted by superintendent and school directors, of preventing any attempt to use this nondescript as a stage. But a school of eighteen hundred students could not be denied dramatic entertainment any more than they could be denied athletic exercises. Eight years ago, within a year, the first play was given; the next year two were presented; the following year the monstrosity which had put a premium on the chorus and a discount on the drama was torn out and a proper stage built. So the production has increased, till now, during the last school year, there were given sixteen separate performances of eight dramatic pieces ranging from Milton's *Comus* and Sheridan's *School for Scandal* to Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*; and the school directors attended every one and brought family and friends. Likewise, in the county about our city, nine years ago no plays were given; this year practically all schools of fifty or more pupils gave plays, and the majority of these schools have stages and from one to three stage sets. Similarly rapid growth has taken place in most parts of the country; with this difference, that in some places it began earlier.

This rapid increase, unlike many skyrocket developments in high schools, has not been due to aping the universities; nor has it been due to encouragement from the faculty. It has resulted

from a need which has often amounted to a demand on the part of pupils. They have asked for more than we could grant; they have asked for minstrel shows and vaudeville, which have been refused. The adjustment of this expressed desire of the pupils to the guidance of the faculty has brought about a large measure of co-operation between faculty and students which I believe is wholesome and valuable, and therefore worth setting before you for consideration. What I present is the compilation of no questionnaire whatsoever; likewise it is the residuum of no theory; it is the resultant of actual experience in the two high schools with which I happen to be connected.

In the first place, no narrow limitations should be put upon the kind of production. Musical comedies, the regular drama, a program of one-act plays or farces, masks and pageants, single acts or scenes, plays in German, French, or Latin—all have been produced with marked success. The requirement must be one of quality pure and simple; the play must be worth while producing and worth while attending. Here comes in the first co-operation between pupils and faculty. Long before a play is given—sometimes as long as seven or eight months before—a committee of several pupils and several faculty members is constituted, and a loan of about \$25.00 is advanced by the high-school office. The committee is now launched on its hunt for the right play, its search for the proper “vehicle.” Sometimes the play is found with but little expenditure of money and a few weeks’ search. Sometimes both the Seattle and the Tacoma libraries are ransacked; sometimes many plays are bought; sometimes more than a hundred plays are read and considered by the committee. To a committee thus constituted and thus working, no plays unsuitable for use, no trash, no plays with a semblance of dramatic struggle between puppets is going to make a winning appeal. The final requirement is that the play chosen be accepted by the coach, the stage manager, and the class or organization which is to produce it. Such co-operation has resulted at our school in the choice of such excellent but diverse plays as *As You Like It*, *The Rivals*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Quality Street*, *The Piper*, *A Scrap of Paper*, *A Rose of Plymouth Town*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and *Mice and Men*.

Usually the pupils most interested in plays are on the committee; if, however, the student part of the committee is weak in this line, a course of study and discussion always lead the erring to see the light, to arrive at a fair estimate of a play; to feel with Clayton Hamilton that a play is good only if it forces the spectator to imagine and to realize some truth of life; that the soul of a play is its theme and the body of a play is its story; and that the soul is immortal only when a soul can be discerned. And if an old, old theme comes back to us clad in a new story, we will love it none the less for being old. After a few weeks of such study I have sometimes found student members in advance of faculty members in upholding proper standards.

I have mentioned that the play chosen must be acceptable to the stage director or manager. Such an official from the faculty every school should have; and he should have as many as two assistants from the senior students in the vocational courses of the manual-training department. Of this stage manager as much is required in some plays as of the coach. In the drama of yesteryear character and action were the only important concomitants; the action might take place anywhere and anywhen. But in the drama of today setting has become almost as important a factor as character and action; in fact, if some plays, *Pomander Walk* for instance, should lose their scenery, they would lose their meaning. Formerly the appeal was to the ear; now it is chiefly to the eye, on the sound theory that things seen are mightier than things heard. Stevenson can write to Henry James, "Death to the optic nerve," and Stanley Houghton and Elizabeth Baker may follow; but the great mass of people will still say, "You'll have to show me." So it has come about that the stage director is an important functionary, even for the high-school stage; and he should be present at all meetings of the committee to see that the play chosen is in accordance with the physical conditions possible to create on the high-school stage.

The final selection of the play has advanced the ball to the fifty-yard line, the middle of the field; and this is the place to begin still further teamwork of a different sort. On the part of the faculty there are now at work the coach, the stage manager, and the financial adviser. On the part of the students there are the

business manager and a large number of committees, such as committees on properties, scene-shifting, electric devices, programs, ushering, etc. The coach begins work first by selecting her judges and making all arrangements for tryouts. If, as happens in our school, there are from fifty to a hundred candidates, this is a long, nevertheless valuable, piece of work, and results in a full cast and several understudies being chosen. We choose understudies because eligibility rule is fairly high, an average of 80, not falling below 75 in any of four studies.

When the cast has been selected, our coach, who is always our teacher of oral expression, and our stage manager, who has always been the head of the English department, take entire charge for about two months. Upon the training here received depend, not only the success of the final performance, but also the permanent value of the work to the students in the cast. Here pupils realize the joys of expression and of growing self-confidence; here they form those close ties that lead them to hold in after years class-play reunions; here they form that taste which leads them to organize theater parties to see the best plays. Here we uplift the stage by uplifting a part of the future audiences. All this, even though the coach be thoroughly trained and prepared herself, will not be accomplished without Herculean labors: many an evening, after a three-hour rehearsal, she will come home like Ibsen's Petra, delightfully tired.

Meanwhile the stage manager is doing the work cut out for him. He has a stage with five or six exteriors and four or five interiors. Probably two of these fit the play more or less; probably two more are needed to give a suitable scenic investiture. One of these two new sets he will probably have entirely done by pupils, total expense not to exceed ten or twelve dollars. If he doesn't find Seniors ready at hand to do this work, he will go down to the Freshman art class and select two boys. These he will set to work on a few studies of wood-graining, knot-holes, and shading, and tell them to come around for a job of work Saturday. The advantage of his taking Freshmen for this is that he has the prospect of using them for three years more. The stage director, however, needs one more set for the play, the best set of all four. He hunts

up a professional scenic artist, confers with him fully about the play and its tone and the plan of the particular set, indicates where the leading lines of the stage picture should converge, and within one month his work of art is ready, a work of art where the painter has had the advantage of three dimensions instead of one, and is to have the further advantage of changing instead of fixed light. These drop-curtain sets, painted at the nominal price of five cents per square foot, are the pride and talk of the school and seldom fail to draw a hand when the curtain rises. These two new sets thus made, one by pupils and one by the artist, become the permanent possession of the school, and the total cost has not exceeded \$60.00. Then, too, the stage director needs properties; he draws upon the manual-training skill in the Senior class for trees, logs, rocks, cannon, and fireplaces, and the age of mechanical invention reaches its acme for those boys. If he needs spinning-wheel, harpsichord, or horn lantern, he calls upon the historical society or the museum. He asks a fellow-teacher to help the Senior boys who act as electricians. Meanwhile, the coach, foreseeing the completion of her labors, has called in teachers to help with costumes and makeup, or has found among the students one or more who are proficient along one of these lines.

Here someone objects that in his high school there is no stage. There should be one, by all means. It will be useful to begin with; it will develop greater usefulness as the days go by. Aside from the production of plays in the usual sense, our stage has been recently used to present a scene from *Much Ado* before the Parent-Teachers' Association; to present Tennyson's *The Falcon* at the last Senior assembly; to present *A Roman Wedding* and *A Latin School* to the students of the Latin department and their parents; to present a short German play to the students of the German department; to present farces by Howells, Bangs, and Richard Harding Davis; to present simple dramatizations of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Ivanhoe*; to present scenes from Shakspeare at assemblies; and to present short plays in all modern languages by students of the ever-growing night school. Since the theaters downtown have curtailed production, the demand for amateur dramatic presentation has rightly increased and should be satisfied. There

are people in our city who go to every play staged at the high school, but to few others except the movies. One reason for the large attendance at high-school plays is the low price of admission, the maximum of twenty-five cents being fixed by the board. Each production is given two successive nights and is witnessed by from 2,000 to 2,400 people. If the school had to use a downtown theater, the price would have to be increased greatly, and the attendance, especially by students, would be correspondingly decreased. For these reasons, among others, a stage should be a necessary part of the auditorium, and it should be equipped with at least one excellent exterior and one interior set for general purposes. Other sets can be added by the school as need arises. If there are two or more high schools in the city, the sets should be made to fit the two or more stages.

The night of the play has come at last. If the play is a present-day drama of illusion, the stage director has had his greatest chance; but his settings must not be too crowded with detail, for such is too expensive in time, and in the end is utterly unimaginative. If personality, however, is revealed by the setting, as in *The Music Master* and *Quality Street*, he must be sure that his stage measures up to the author's demand. If the play is one of Shakspeare's, or Goldsmith's, or Sheridan's, then the coach has had her greatest opportunity, for the drama is chiefly auditory instead of visual. Whatever the play, the audience is there in force; the house is packed each night long before eight o'clock; and in this crowd there are enough parents and friends of the cast to form a scattered band of what the French call *claqueurs*, or hired applauders; and the play goes off to the contagion of increasing laughter and applause. The coach must not bolster up her judgment too much by this easy applause; she must have reached a point where the acting receives her own hearty approbation. She must in her training constantly bear in mind that actions speak louder than words; but she must not, even in a drama of illusion, overlook the words, the proper reading of the lines. It is true that poetry is nowadays expressed by the pictorial appurtenances of the stage; but the devices of the stage carpenter can never take the place of good reading of the author's lines. We have chosen, we must

remember, a play with lines worth reading. On the other hand the coach must take care that the delivery is conversational, not rhetorical; for a rhetorical speech will instantly pull the actor out of the picture frame and shatter all the illusion. She must remember also our modern stage convention known as the eavesdropping convention, which requires seemingly total oblivion to the audience. When the two hours' traffic of the stage are over, when the magic mirror has been held up to nature, and everybody, even the actors, has pronounced this play the best ever given, there is still one point that must not be overlooked—the proper use of the net proceeds. I have heard that in some schools this fund is used for a "Senior class blowout"; that in other schools plays even fail to pay expenses and leave debts behind. Neither of these conditions is satisfactory; in the slang of our stage friends, "both are equally as worse as each." Even at twenty-five cents admission, there is always a profit of from \$100 to \$400, and this we always spend in purchasing works of fine art for our high schools. One play purchased a complete set of Copley prints of Abbey's Holy Grail decorations colored from the Boston library; another purchased an original oil painting; another a dozen famous portraits such as Whistler's "Carlyle"; another a large group of reproductions of famous pre-Raphaelite paintings; still another added its mite to the building of our stadium. It is thus that the drama encourages other arts; and in return the fame of the art work adds to the drawing power of the drama. Thus students and alumni are kept interested, and their future recreation is directed; and thus all the community is interested through art and the drama, and is drawn to the interior of our high-school building, as our stadium regularly draws the community by the tens of thousands to view its magnificent exterior modeled after the French château.

Just a word more about such exceptional performances as Milton's *Comus*, the morality play *Everyman*, the Irish drama, poetical dramas, and Greek tragedies. This class can be illustrated by our last year's re-presentment of *Comus*. The mask is not simply drama; it is a composite form, consisting of poetry, dancing, singing, acting, pantomime, beautiful costuming, elaborate staging, and delicate compliments. By its very nature the mask must



always be produced by amateurs. For these reasons, its composite form and amateur requirement, we found the mask *Comus* gave the greatest opportunity for co-operation of all departments which has ever come to our faculty. Only incidentally was *Comus* presented to entertain the visiting high-school teachers of the state; primarily, it was undertaken to entertain the pupils of Stadium and Lincoln Park high schools. A general idea of the co-operation developed is shown by the following schedule of assignments: choosing the student cast and coaching, by the English department and teacher of oral expression, upon whom the heaviest burden fell; teaching songs and instrumental music, by the music department; dances, taught by the gymnasium instructors; costuming, by the departments of history, art, and domestic science; invitations and programs, by the language departments; staging and properties, by the departments of manual training and science; finance, by the commercial department. As *Comus* was complimentary every time it was presented, the financial problem may cause you to wonder. That was managed in this way: the Irish story-teller, Seumas McManus, came to us one day and told stories to the high school after dismissal and to the grade teachers and public that night. The net proceeds were over \$200. As we could use most of our *As You Like It* scenery for *Comus*, we found \$200 ample for other expenses. Thus again was one art made to encourage and support another; but it is hard to say whether the story-telling art of the Irish helped *Comus* more than the prospect of *Comus* helped the art of the Irish story-teller.

In connection with this class of special performances, I may venture to remind you that this year, 1916, is a Shakspeare tercentenary; that the Drama League of America will soon issue a bibliography in furtherance of this tercentennial celebration; and that you cannot too early begin to organize your community for a festival of Shaksperian plays, songs, folk-dances, and pageants. This is again a rare opportunity for lending a helping hand to the very best.

I still seem to hear objections, to this effect: our school has no stadium for pageantry; we have no stage; our faculty is limited; our number of students is too small for such extensive dramatic

effort. All well and good; I can speak from the viewpoint of the small high school, and speak from a full experience too. Let your city park or school yard take the place of our stadium for pageants; let your town hall, or the theater, or even a church take the place of our high-school stage; get outside help if you must, but use all of your faculty first and keep the direction of everything under the thumb of some one faculty member. If your faculty is small, do not undertake as much as larger schools, but undertake the best and do it as well. You will find that the best is none too good, even for the smallest school.

Since this paper was written, I have been startled by a question asked by three or four teachers, "Do you favor plays in high school?" This question has made me think that maybe I have reckoned without my host being with me, for it had never occurred to me that any English teacher could *not favor* such plays. Opposition, if there is such, must arise from the poor management of plays in the past; and I hope this paper may help to bring about good management. It has been said recently that in our high schools there is too much teaching and not enough training. Here, in producing plays, as in work on the school magazine, debating, and public speaking, is an opportunity for English teachers to *train* pupils.